

POETICS OF REUSE OF THE HISTORICAL HERITAGE: THREE CASE STUDIES OF EPHEMERAL ARCHITECTURE IN VENICE

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Abstract. The archetype of the vessel, declined ontologically as heterotopia and etymologically as *trait d'union* of a community, becomes the pretext to propose the restoration of Venice's citizenship through a "poetics of reuse". The relationship between ephemeral architecture and historical heritage is analysed according to the three criteria identified by Pierre Pinon. The concept of *reutilisation* is declined through building materials. *Reconversion* is identified through examples of radical change of use of historic military buildings. *Reappropriation* is associated with the temporary expansion of the potential of public space through architectural installations. Case studies corresponding to each category are identified, and from the primary sources the three-dimensional redesign of these projects is contextualised in the historical surroundings, in order to deduce considerations regarding the relationship between the two frameworks. Since the case studies are very extensive and rather heterogeneous, the novelty lies in the transversal reading approach that returns the Biennale's magnificent centenary activity directly to the city and its inhabitants, subverting the negative connotation that cultural tourism has acquired on the island. The research aims to create an atlas of ephemeral architecture, define a taxonomy and draw up a document containing guidelines for future experiences of ephemeral architecture in the city.

Keywords: reuse, regeneration, heritage, Venice, ephemeral, Biennale, atlas, taxonomy, ethics, manifesto.

Introduction

The research scope focuses on the historic centre of Venice, a city known for its architectural heritage and the ephemeral events that unfold there, but also subject to a phenomenon of progressive abandonment by its citizenry in favour of mass tourism. Thus, the city is ceding its human heritage, that of the residents, in exchange for a population composed of ephemeral inhabitants, an antinomy already denounced in the book "Se Venezia muore" (If Venice Dies) by Salvatore Settis. In order to counter this phenomenon, the author introduces the idea of a "poetics of reuse", basing himself on the Plutarchian legend of the continuous regeneration of Theseus' ship. This takes place contextually to the degeneration of its component parts, by virtue of the "operational bonds" that preserve the unity of the community involved in the reconstruction of the vessel. Venice is therefore seen as a great shipyard that can only be maintained by the operational creativity of its inhabitants (Settis, 2014).

Leaving aside the binomial logic between residentiality and tourism, it is interesting to investigate the nuances that bind and separate these two apparently opposing and contrasting realities. A common ground can be found in the heterotopia of ephemeral architecture, which plays a temporary but fundamental role in the regeneration of the city's historical-architectural heritage. In the same way as another ship, namely the one theorised by Foucault and defined as the "heterotopia par excellence", ephemeral architecture is also the repository of the creative impetus that the philosopher defines as a "reservoir of imagination" and concurrently an "instrument of economic development" (Foucault, 2018). These concepts will be examined in depth hereafter through some virtuous examples.

The reference by both authors to the archetype of the ship to validate their theses gives rise to a dual interpretation: on the one hand the ship returned to port after a legendary adventure as a narrative for the regeneration of the

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city's historical heritage, on the other hand the navigation of a "floating fragment of space, a place without a place" as self-determination in the transitory. It is no coincidence that the naval allegory refers to a former maritime power such as the Venetian Republic, especially considering that the Arsenal compendium was the forge of the naval power that distinguished it for centuries. But to every ascending phase there corresponds a descending phase and vice versa, and so it was that in 1980, after a period of progressive abandonment of the buildings' functionality, the First International Architecture Exhibition was inaugurated right inside the Corderie dell'Arsenale. This is a prestigious example of reuse of the Venetian building heritage through ephemeral architecture, represented in this case by the façades of the installation "Strada Novissima" (Mostra internazionale di architettura, 1980) (Figures 1–2).

Since then, there have been numerous proposals to refunctionalise the Arsenal complex, making it a place for experimenting with different facets of what has been defined as "adaptive reuse" (Brooker & Stone, 2004). Preferring to overlook these projects, to focus instead on the transversal approach of the research, the authors adopt a lexicon inspired by the three different acceptations of the term "reutilisation" highlighted by Pierre Pinon in the architectural framework: "reutilisation" proper as the restoration of the original use, "reconversion" as a forcing towards a new use, and "reappropriation" as a natural passage from one use to another (Pinon, 1999).

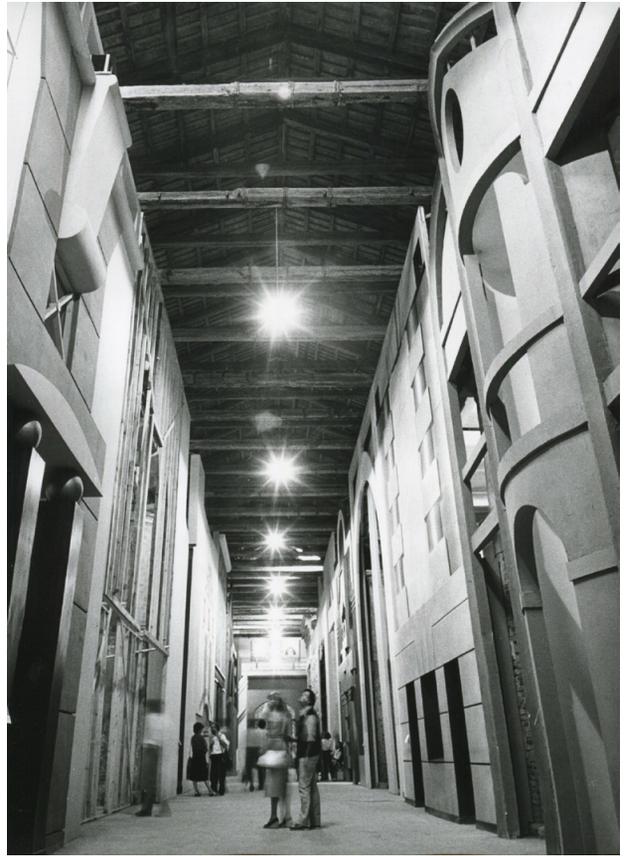


Figure 1. "Strada Novissima", The Presence of the Past, 1980.
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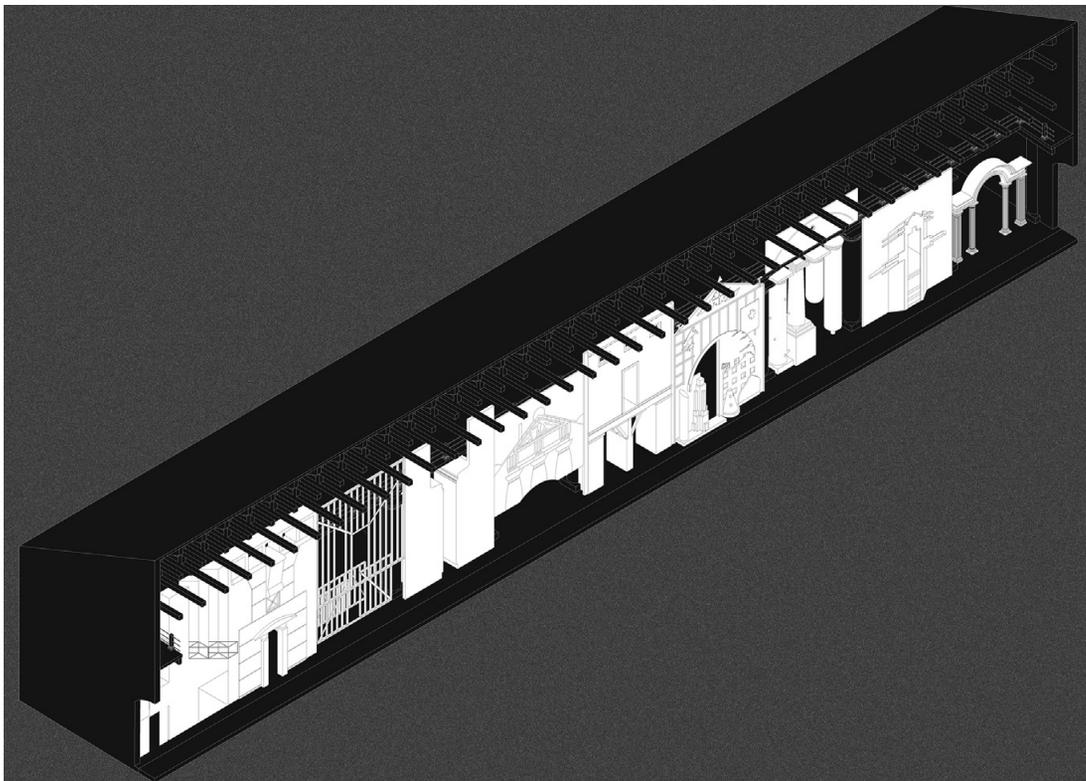


Figure 2. Some facades of "Strada Novissima" set up at the Corderie dell'Arsenale in 1980. Authors, left to right: Costantino Dardi; Michael Graves; Frank O. Gehry; Oswald Mathias Ungers; Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott-Brown; Léon Krier; Joseph-Paul Kleihues; Hans Hollein; Massimo Scolari; Allan Greenberg

By justifying the creative scope of ephemeral architecture as benevolent towards the regeneration of the historical architectural heritage, the general aim is to identify a strategy capable of making programmatic the “poetics of reuse” theorised by Settis, identifying in the proposed examples methodological models. A phenomenological analysis is conducted through the development of three-dimensional graphic representations of the relationship between ephemeral architecture and historical heritage, highlighted in light and dark tones respectively. The specific objectives of the research are to create an atlas of ephemeral architecture, define a taxonomy and draw up a document containing guidelines to be employed in future exhibition initiatives in Venice and elsewhere.

1. Review of literature concerning the reuse of historical heritage through ephemeral architecture in Venice

The Venetian Arsenal was the object of numerous studies during the last two centuries (Casoni, 1829), continuing with a particularly exhaustive study following the First International Architecture Exhibition (Bellavitis, 1983; Concina, 1984). Given the rapid transformations that have seen the Arsenal as a protagonist since the 1980s, research on this time span has recently been published with a specific focus on the interventions realised to refunctionalise the abandoned areas of the Arsenal (Bosio et al., 2017), and conducting an interesting comparative analysis with other cases of arsenal regeneration in Europe (Severo & Val, 2020). The novelty introduced in this paper lies in the analysis of a case study concerning the *reconversion* of a building pertaining to the Italian Navy, still established within the Arsenal walls but of which few up-to-date bibliographical references are available.

Reutilisation, instead, is declined by the authors in a materialistic sense, referring to the reuse of the materials employed in the setting up of the ephemeral architectures within the framework of the Venice Biennale. This attitude is still in an experimental phase and there isn't a specific literature on the subject, with the exception of a few publications delving into the pioneering work of a group of local activists, especially for their collaboration with the French collective Exyzt (Dannatt et al., 2010; Kelly, 2010). To these avant-garde experiences adds the intervention of Rural Studio, which uses unconventional materials in the realisation of an ephemeral architecture at the Corderie, precisely according to the primary meaning of *reutilisation* described by Pinon. While the work of the Auburn University branch is well documented (Dean & Hursley, 2005; Freear et al., 2014; Oppenheimer, 2002), there are no traces of the experience developed in Venice among academic publications. It is therefore proposed to systematise this experience within a broader framework that deals specifically with the poetics of reuse in architecture.

Much has been said instead in academic circles about ephemeral architecture, starting with the essay that is considered the foundation of this oxymoron (Tafari, 1980).

From the very beginning, the ephemeral is glimpsed as a trespass from architectural practice, a plethora that looks to the world of art (Tanca, 1980). But to become an international lexicon, this term will have to wait a few decades, when this prominence will transcend the art-architecture binomial to express tactics of social activism, as in the case of the Spanish collective “Recetas Urbanas” (Cirugeda, 2007) and of the movement “Arquitecturas Colectivas” (Cirugeda Parejo et al., 2010), or to describe informal phenomena of temporary urbanisation (Mehrotra, 2017). That the term is rightfully part of contemporary international culture is also evident from publications of a typological character (Sánchez Vidiella, 2016). In order to be able to analyse the concept of *reappropriation*, the authors propose a trespass into public space, thus overcoming the short circuit created by displaying an exhibition that has architecture as its subject, and not art (Arhenius et al., 2014; Pelkonen, 2015; Szacka, 2016). It is therefore preferred to join a developing line of research that explores the reappropriation of public space also from artistic (Urbonas et al., 2017) and scenographic points of view (García Pérez, 2019; Mosetti, 2020). Experimenting with ephemeral architecture in a highly complex public context such as Venice entails a magisterial use of the poetics of reuse, through the temporary reappropriation of urban voids.

The semantics intended to be used in this paper, concerning the three different meanings of Pinon's term “reutilisation”, fits into the debate developed at the turn of the millennium, which has seen the emergence of the term “adaptive reuse” as the common denominator of the different types of architectural heritage reutilisation. The lexical preponderance of the term is developed through an interdisciplinary strand of research that starts from interior architecture (Brooker & Stone, 2004) and engineering (Douglas, 2006) before being claimed as a discipline in its own right (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019). Despite the uneven categorisation of adaptive reuse design strategies by different researchers being considered confusing (Arfa et al., 2022), the authors evaluate the proposed classification into “insertion, intervention and installation” (Brooker & Stone, 2004) to be more suitable for the aims of this paper, focusing particularly on the latter. The term “installation”, in fact, describes the relationship that ephemeral architecture establishes with the historical building heritage, giving rise to apparently minor outcomes, such as limited size and duration, stochastic relationship with the context and reduced impact on the host building (Stone, 2005). However, considering the large number of ephemeral architectures produced periodically and systematically in the same context, as in the case of the International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, the installation typology entails such an impact on the historical architectural heritage as to determine previous or subsequent strategies of insertion and intervention on the pre-existing framework. The reinterpretation of the three meanings of “reutilisation, reconversion and reappropriation” is therefore used by the authors to exemplify this profound relationship

between ephemeral architecture and historical heritage in the Venetian context, remaining in the domain of adaptive reuse and emphasising its poetic values.

In the literature, cultural values have already been catalogued and organised in a matrix, demonstrating the close correlation with historical heritage (Pereira Roders, 2007). The author identifies the following primary values: social, economic, political, historical, aesthetic, scientific, age, ecological. The intellectual effort that is made through this paper is to identify further values that can define, besides historical heritage and ephemeral architecture, a new taxonomy, that of the poetics of reuse.

2. Methodology

The professional practice of one of the authors in the field of ephemeral architecture displayed at the Venice Biennale constitutes the pretext to deepen a documentary research that is developed starting from secondary bibliographic sources and then continuing through the study of primary sources at the Project Archive of the Iuav of Venice and the ASAC Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts of the La Biennale Foundation of Venice. The field study occurs thanks to the establishment of a collaboration between the Universidad de Sevilla and the Università Iuav di Venezia, first through the activation of a stay with an Erasmus+ grant and then through the stipulation of a co-tutorship agreement for the doctoral thesis of one of the authors between the two institutions. At the archives, it was possible to analyse the projects, original watercolours and sketches, communications between the organisers and participants, and photographs of the realisation of the works and of the meetings with the authors. These data allow the redrawing and three-dimensional reconstruction through digital models of these lost architectures, with the intention of virtually relocating them in the original site and analysing their relationship with the surrounding area. The research includes the proposal of a taxonomy to categorise the different influences that determine the relationship between ephemeral architecture and historical heritage. A selection of case studies is analysed and systematised for the development of the proposal, consisting of an atlas-catalogue of virtuous examples to be considered as methodological models to direct future developments of ephemeral installations towards environmental sustainability, social involvement, restoration and consolidation of the local historical-architectural heritage.

3. Three case studies: reconversion, reutilisation and reappropriation

To exemplify the three declinations of the term “reutilisation” disclosed by Pinon, specific case studies are resorted to, located in distinct time frames and situations, but always relevant to the Venice Biennale:

- the case of the Lithuania Pavilion in 2019, at the S96 Building of the Italian Navy in Venice;

- the installation “Theater of the UseFULL” at the Corderie dell’Arsenale in 2016;
- a review of ephemeral architectures realised in the Venetian public space since 1980.

The overall objective of the research is to define a model of intervention that integrates “reuse” as a paradigm of the relationship between ephemeral architecture and the regeneration of historical heritage.

3.1. The Lithuanian Pavilion and the reconversion of a military building

In 2019, for the first time, a National Pavilion, that of Lithuania, crosses the borders of the Navy to temporarily establish its venue in one of the historic buildings within the military area of the Venice Arsenal (Figures 3–4), earning the coveted *Golden Lion* in recognition of “the Pavilion’s engagement with the city of Venice and its inhabitants” (La Biennale di Venezia, 2019). An anomalous fact, which denotes how ephemeral architecture, in this case declined as a temporary art pavilion, is used as part of the effective mechanism for the reconversion of historical heritage, regardless of whether it concerns active garrisons of strategic military importance.

Building S96, formerly *Officine dei Remeri*, is located in the northern part of the Navy. It is a building with a surface area of 455 square metres, approximately 8 m high, with an internal gallery and dating back to 1834, designed by Eng. Casoni, intended for cultural and exhibition activities and managed by the Maritime Military Studies Institute (SBAP di Venezia e Laguna, 2010). In recent years, the building envelope has undergone renovation and maintenance work on the walls, roofs, and floors, carried out with respect for the conservation of the building’s characteristics. The interventions are in line with what has been documented by the Superintendence, which already in the restoration of the Corderie dell’Arsenale during the 1980s had identified “as a priority the restoration of the roofs, as the first source of deterioration of the buildings” (Severo, 2008).



Figure 3. “Sun & Sea: Marina”, Lithuanian Pavilion, 2019. Jean-Pierre Dalbéra from Paris, France, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

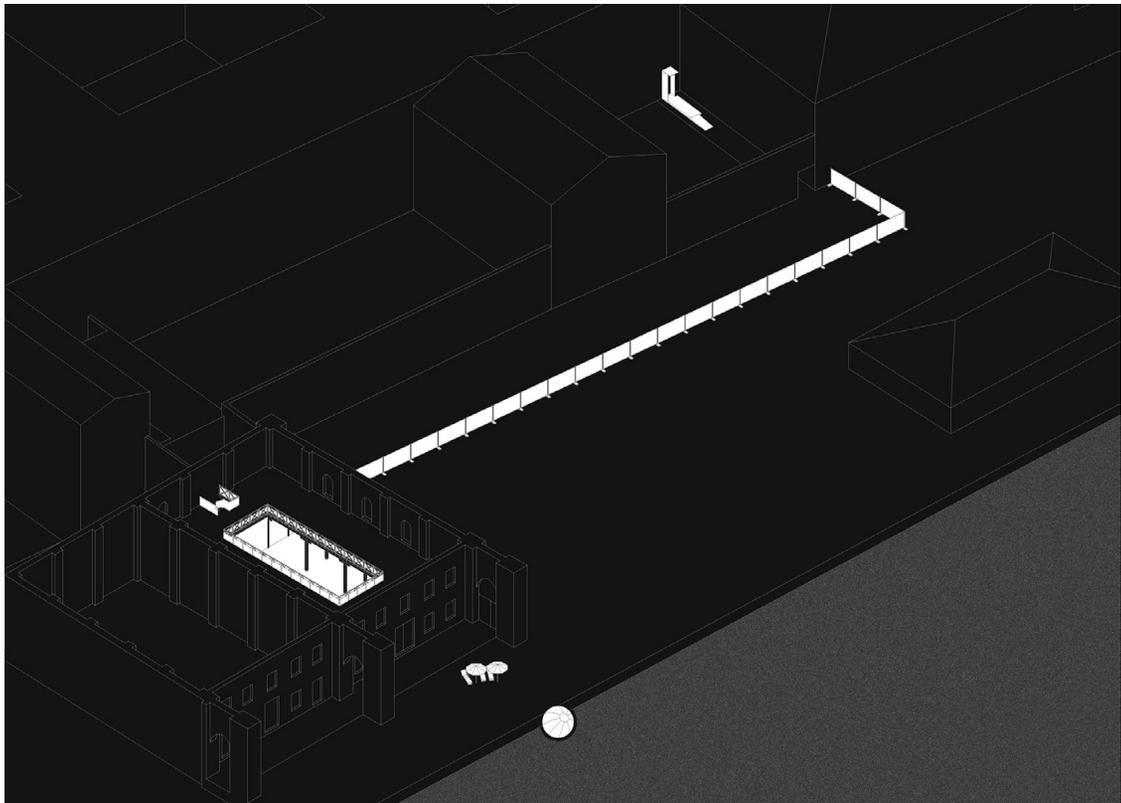


Figure 4. The Navy spaces dedicated to the exhibition route for the opera “Sun & Sea: Marina” in 2019

At the time of the feasibility study for the exhibition of the opera “Sun & Sea: Marina”, however, a number of critical aspects were detected that could have jeopardised public access:

- the inadequacy of the wooden parapets of the mezzanine;
- the need to reinforce the structure of the access staircase to the mezzanine itself;
- the absence of the Fire Prevention Certificate.

These aspects determine a further series of minor interventions on the building of the former *Officine dei Remeri*, preparatory to the holding of any public artistic event within it. Once the internal scenography of the pavilion is established, a path is created for public access, consisting of a secondary entrance located near *Campo de la Celestia*, to activate which a series of temporary ramps and shelters are installed, ending inside Building S96, which in this way also becomes accessible to visitors with mobility difficulties. The building envelope is finally suitable for public use, and it can be recognised how the installation of an ephemeral architecture could assist in the reconversion of a military building to public use.

3.2. The reutilisation of materials from an installation at the *Corderie dell’Arsenale*

A few years earlier, in 2016, the 15th International Architecture Exhibition features Rural Studio, a branch of Auburn University, Alabama. For the construction of the

installation “Theater of the UseFULL” (Figures 5–6), the designers decide to act in Venice in the same way they develop projects in the Newbern community, namely by involving and supporting local communities. Various local groups and associations are contacted, and with two of them, a cooperative that provides shelter for homeless

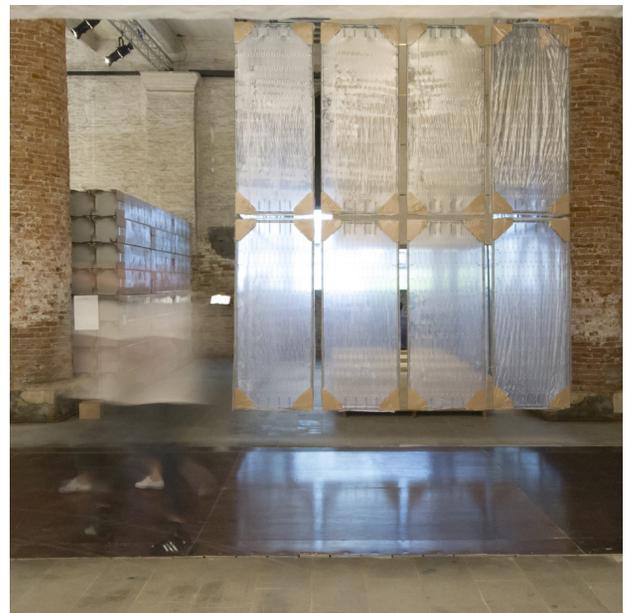


Figure 5. “Theater of the UseFULL”, Rural Studio, 2016

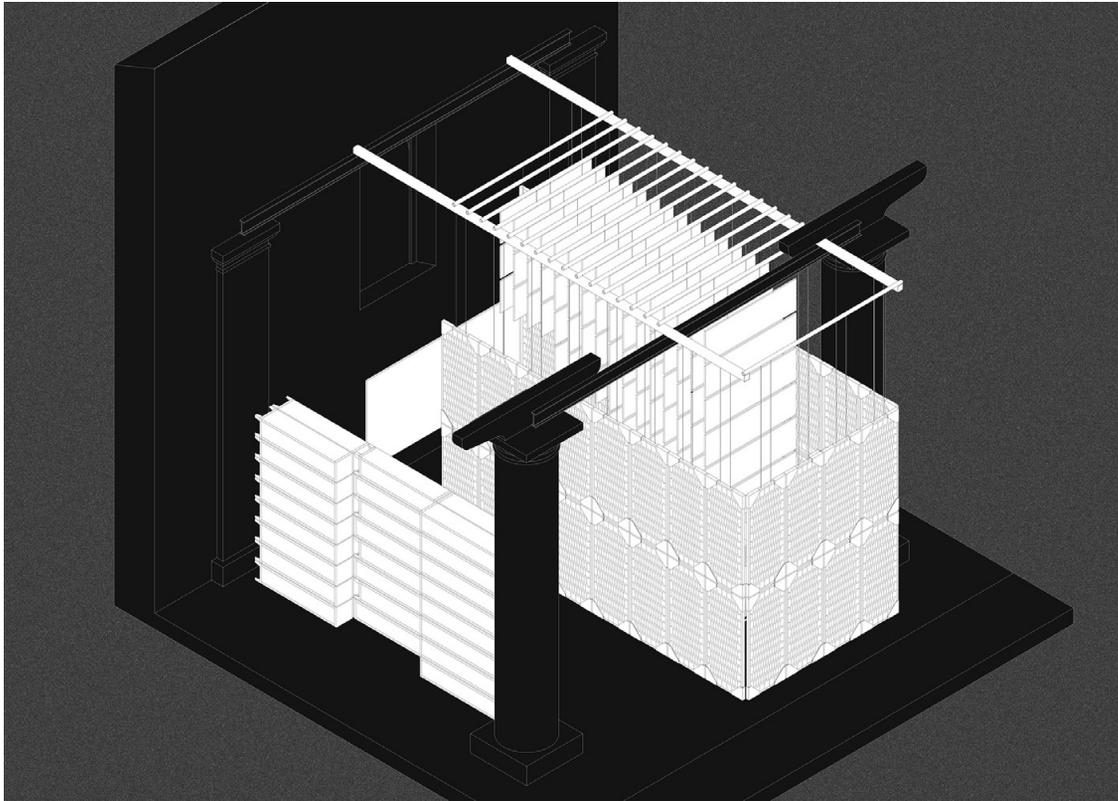


Figure 6. Furniture materials assembled to create Rural Studio's "Theater of the UseFULL" at the Corderie dell'Arsenale in 2016

people and an agency whose mission is the renovation of abandoned public housing, a relationship of mutual collaboration is created. The two organisations have the task of choosing materials suitable for the realisation of their local projects, in exchange for the donation of the same by the North American university, after participating in the exhibition. These consist of heterogeneous materials such as bed frames, lockers and wood fibre panels that are assembled to create architectural elements such as a dividing shell, a wall, seats and a false ceiling. The components in turn define spaces: an entrance, a corridor, a projection room. The prepared materials are presented still wrapped in their original packaging, ready to be handed over to local associations as if these had never been used. At the end of the exhibition, these materials fulfil their original function as furniture for the reception centre, allowing 40 new beds to be set up, and as building materials used to renovate an abandoned council house on the island of Giudecca. This strategy avoids the creation of waste, making the exhibition highly environmentally sustainable, and also contributes to reinvigorating the "operational links" that unite the local community (Settis, 2014).

3.3. The reappropriation of Venetian public space through ephemeral architecture

Ephemeral architecture found great development in the Venetian public space, especially in the Baroque age, a period during which the city was intended as a stage

for setting up urban scenographies and erecting floating monuments and theatrical machines to celebrate visits by foreign princes (Brusatin, 1979). The Venice Biennale foresaw great potential in this tradition, experimenting with its reinterpretation in a contemporary key through a series of urban installations. First of all, Aldo Rossi's "Theatre of the World" (Brusatin & Prandi, 1982) (Figures 7–8), followed by his "Portals" erected at the entrance to the Arsenal and Giardini (Rossi & Ferlenga, 1999). The Rossi paradigm was then reiterated by the award-winning



Figure 7. "Theatre of the World", Aldo Rossi, 1979. © Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC

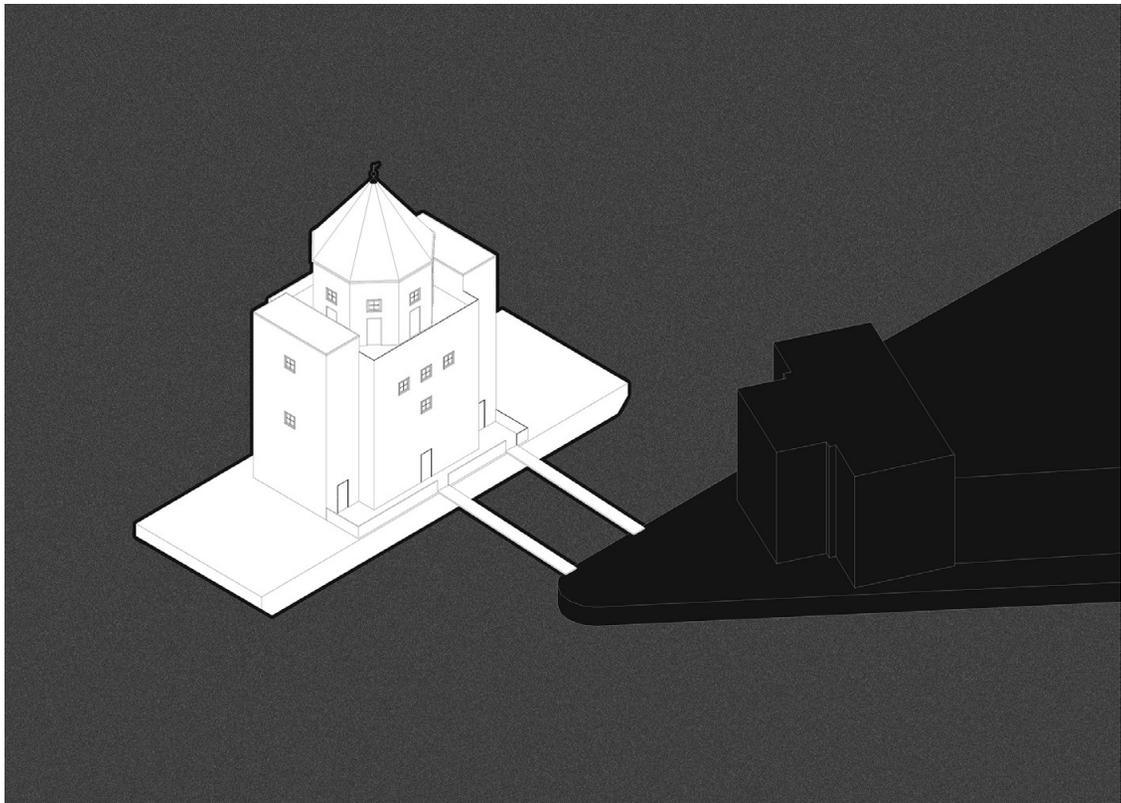


Figure 8. Extension of Venetian public space due to Aldo Rossi's "Theatre of the World" at Punta della Dogana in 1979

project of the floating installation "The Venice Cubes" by Detlef Mallwitz (Mostra internazionale di architettura, 1985), the "Wings" by Massimo Scolari and the entrance portal to the Corderie in "Homage to Ludovico Quaroni" by Pippo Ciorra (Mostra internazionale di architettura, 1991). In this postmodern phase of evolution of ephemeral architecture, the valorisation of the scenic aspect of the city hints towards a floating or flying nomadism, rather than a celebration of the public's entrance to the Biennale. Ephemeral architecture becomes a medium for emphasising the potential of public space as a heterotopic place, thus as an extension of the existing space towards new functions and morphologies.

This new trend towards the reappropriation of public space through ephemeral architecture finds wide application in subsequent years, embodying an increasingly international spirit. In particular, the heterotopia of the "fragment of floating space" (Foucault, 2018) is implemented by the boat "Trafaria Praia" representing the Portuguese Pavilion (Gioni & Bell, 2013). A more radical example is the "Swimming Cities of Serenissima", a raft built from recycled materials by a not invited artist, who took advantage of the Venetian stage to carry out various "raids" of a pirate nature during the Biennale's vernissage (Bullock, 2015). The heterotopia of the ephemeral adopts a pile dwelling typology with the "Deep Garden", realised by the A12 group (Benucci et al., 2009), and the "Swamp Pavilion" (Figures 9–10), a never realised proposal by an interdisciplinary group of architects and artists invited to

represent Lithuania (Urbonas & Urbonas, 2018). In spite of the heterogeneous character of these design episodes, which alternately crosses the line between officiousness and utopia, they demonstrate an opportunity for visitors and for the city of Venice in general to reappropriate public space through the temporary extension of built space, starting from the fragile border between lagoon and urban space that allow these "parasite" architectures (Marini, 2008) to connect to the network of services and routes offered by the island.

4. Research results

As can be deduced from the case studies analysed, the categorisation proposed by Pinon becomes a pretext to express the values that contribute to the taxonomic definition of the "poetics of reuse" of historical heritage through ephemeral architecture. Each of the given examples, in fact, is strongly characterised by at least one of the following cultural values: environmental sustainability, social involvement, restoration and consolidation of architectural heritage, extension of public space. Ephemeral architecture, therefore, can be evaluated through criteria that highlight improvements in ecological, social, cultural, economic, administrative, technological, design, heritage and citizen terms, adapting, integrating and developing what has already been analysed in the literature. These values make it possible to add a new taxonomy to the panorama of ephemeral architecture: the poetics of reuse.

The redrawing of ephemeral architectures from the original plans, regardless of their realisation, allows an atlas to be reconstructed through an imaginative journey. The abstract and schematic character assumed by the three-dimensional illustrations becomes a cue to extend the analysis of the architectural narrative from pure formalism to the real impact on the city. Behind the longitudinality and rhythm of the façades of “Strada Novissima” (Figures 1–2), in fact, lies a large project for the reconversion of a historic building that has fallen into disuse, becoming in turn a methodological model for the recovery of other areas of the Navy, as happens with “Sun & Sea: Marina” (Figures 3–4). The use of suspended furnishing elements to define architectural spaces, as in the case of “Theatre of the UseFULL” (Figures 5–6), is due to an investment in social projects linked to the territory and its cultural heritage, through a reutilisation strategy. A floating architecture held by two slender gangways, the “Theatre of the World” (Figures 7–8), becomes the symbol of the reappropriation of a cultural tradition based on the ephemeral, such as carnival and theatre. The officiousness or even non-realisation of some design proposals, on the other hand, manifest an excess in terms of cultural values, relegating the design effort to radicality, such as the “Swimming Cities of Serenissima”, or to abstraction, such as the “Swamp Pavilion” (Figures 9–10). The atlas therefore serves to highlight not only the principles that characterise the architecture (location, typology, functionality, construction technique, aesthetics, routes, etc.) or the

adaptive reuse of historical heritage, but above all serves to bring out the exceptional design narrative of these experiences, that of the poetics of reuse.

And it is precisely from these exceptions and their narrative exceedance that inspiration can be taken for the writing of a document containing guidelines that make the poetics of reuse programmatic. The cultural values listed above become founding points of a manifesto or code of ethics whose general objective is to produce a giveback to



Figure 9. “Swamp ponchos”. Design: Urbonas Studio with Sandra Straukaitė, drawings: Lithuanian architects, pattern: Gailė Prancūnaitė, Polyurethane, UV print, 136×212 cm, limited edition. La Biennale di Venezia, 2018. Photo: Norbert Tukaj © Swamp School, curated by Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas

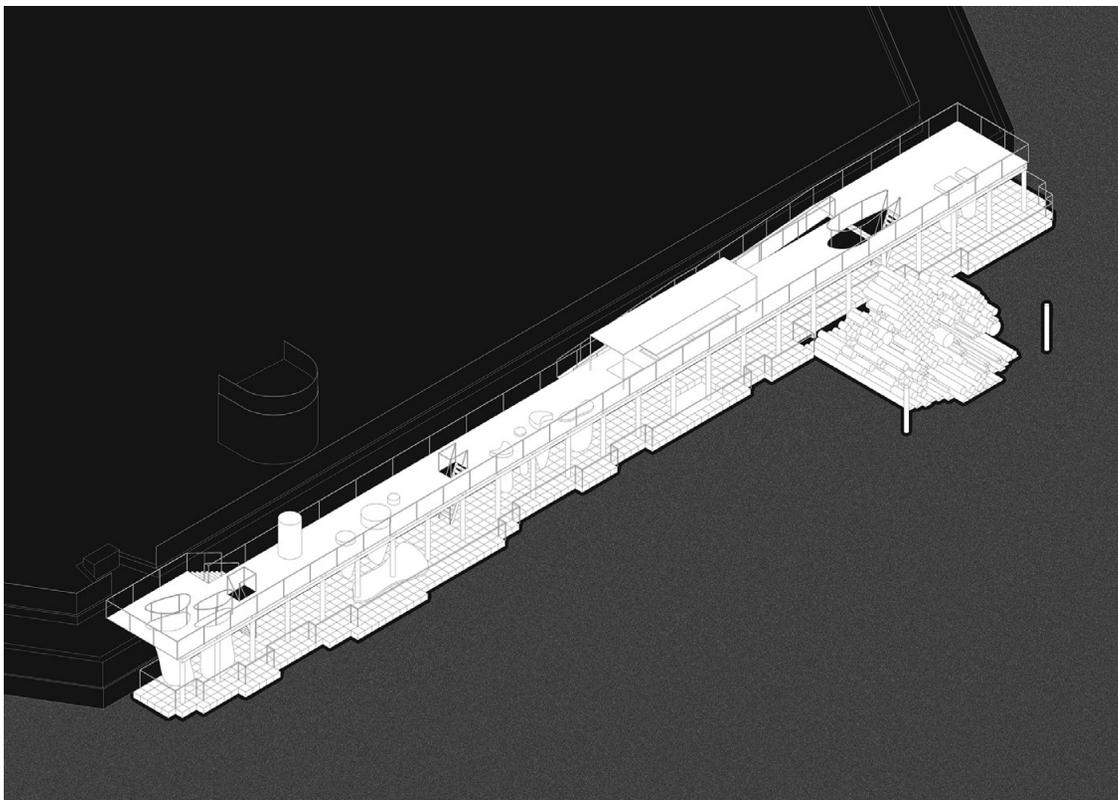


Figure 10. Axonometric view based on unrealized proposal for the “Swamp Pavilion” curated by Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas for Lithuanian representation at 16th International Architecture Exhibition in 2018

the territory and its citizens through ephemeral architecture. Aiming at environmental sustainability, recycling of materials, social involvement, residency, proximity trade. In short, aiming at the recovery of the city's heritage, be it cultural, architectural, artistic, natural, occupational, institutionalised or “invisible”, and above all “human”. Ephemeral architecture can undoubtedly play an important role in the sustainable development of the Venetian context, by its very nature counteracting the tendency to consume resources, to become itself a source of support for the city and its inhabitants.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to set the poetics of reuse as programmatic, namely, to stimulate the creation of a giveback mechanism for the city and its inhabitants in processes involving ephemeral architecture initiatives. The atlas of ephemeral architecture, the manifesto or code of ethics, the characterisation through the poetics of reuse, are proposals that reflect an interpretation of the city as a political structure. Indeed, the analysis of case studies in which the relationship between ephemeral architecture and historical-architectural heritage is highlighted reveals the interdisciplinary nature that characterises the phenomenon. The research also shows how cultural values related to heritage regeneration and architectural taxonomies are not sufficient to describe the interdependence between the historical and the ephemeral. The paper shows how the scope of the phenomenon can only be analysed by accepting the complexity of the intentions and effects they entail, to suggest a holistic approach to these themes.

The model resulting from this initial research manifests great potential for application not only in the Venetian context but can also be adopted in the many biennales and art initiatives that periodically take place internationally. Moreover, this proposal could integrate the already existing models of biennale, exporting these to cities and countries that suffer from the loss of their architectural heritage because of the lack of resources necessary for its adaptive reuse. However, the results of the inquiry should not be interpreted as a set of rules or codes to be strictly followed. Rather, the intention is to emphasise how the research is to be considered as a tool and source of inspiration for future projects of ephemeral architecture in heritage contexts.

The paper also lays the groundwork for more extensive investigation, which will aim to deepen the topics discussed. In particular, the specific objectives of future research will be:

- increasing the number of case studies and deepening their characteristics, in order to identify many more virtuous models and discover their strategies and cultural values;
- to define other possible taxonomies that would help to describe the relationship between ephemeral architecture and historical heritage in depth, also

shedding light on other aspects of this complex phenomenon;

- drafting a detailed manifesto or code of ethics containing guidelines capable of providing useful advice to the next designers who will undertake the challenge.

The hope is that future designers of ephemeral architecture and operators in the sector will be able to interpret the poetics of reuse to take care of Venice, its citizens, and the operational ties that unite them, so that the regeneration of the historical heritage will make the city shine again, like the legendary Theseus' vessel.

Author contributions

The illustrations in the article are by Alessandro Zorzetto: Figures 2–4–6–8–10. Copyright of the photograph shown as Figure 5 is © Alessandro Zorzetto.

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